¡¡ VAQUEROS !!

I. GOAL:

To give students an understanding and appreciation of the role the vaquero played in the history and culture of California, the West, and America.

II. HISTORICAL OVERVIEW:

Vaquero is the Spanish name for someone who cares for cows. It comes from the noun, vaca, which means cow and the verb querer which means to want, to care for, or to love. The Americans changed the word to buckaroo. The story of the vaquero begins with the Spanish conquest of the New World. The Spanish Conquistadores (soldiers) brought with them from Europe the two most important things in the life of a vacquero, the cow and the horse. As they explored the New World, the Spanish found huge expanses of grasslands and deserts. The grasslands were created by a variety of environmental conditions including wildfires. Fire would often sweep across the land after being started by lightening, or being deliberately set by Native Americans hunting wild game. The Native Americans lacked modern firefighting equipment and the fires were allowed to bum freely, wiping out trees and grasses. The burning returned nutrients to the soil and the grasses sprouted back rich and healthy. When trees sprouted, they were usually destroyed by bull elk, buffalo, and deer that would attack small trees during fits of anger and frustration. So, the Spanish found a land with lots of grass and not many trees, which was ideal for raising great herds of roaming cattle. Controlling the cattle also made the Spanish brilliant horsemen. They always rode with great pride and ability, and they became a symbol of western life.

Raising cattle was the most important aspect of the California economy during the time of Sutter's Fort before the Gold Rush. The Industrial Revolution created a demand for leather (hide) belts to turn the wheels and conveyors of power equipment. Trading vessels from New England visited the shores of California to trade for hides and tallow and take them to the industrial markets of the world. Later, a demand for beef was spurred by the Gold Rush when tens of thousands of people from all over the world, descended upon a land that was used to supporting very few EuroAmericans. Cattle ranching continued to be an important industry in California and the Spanish vaquero evolved into an icon of the American West, the cowboy.

III. THE LIFE AND WORK OF THE VAQUERO

The vaquero was just one component of a trinity composed of the human, the horse, and the cow. Each component benefited from the other. Humans supplied the brains and the hands, but humans are not very strong and don't run very fast. Horses are strong and fast, but not very smart. Cattle are big and mean, and dumber than horses. When the vacquero is united with the horse, the human becomes bigger, stronger, and faster. This is important in controlling big, mean, wild cows. The vacqueros care for their horses and train them to be superior tools in controlling cattle. The cows also have the vacqueros to take care of them,

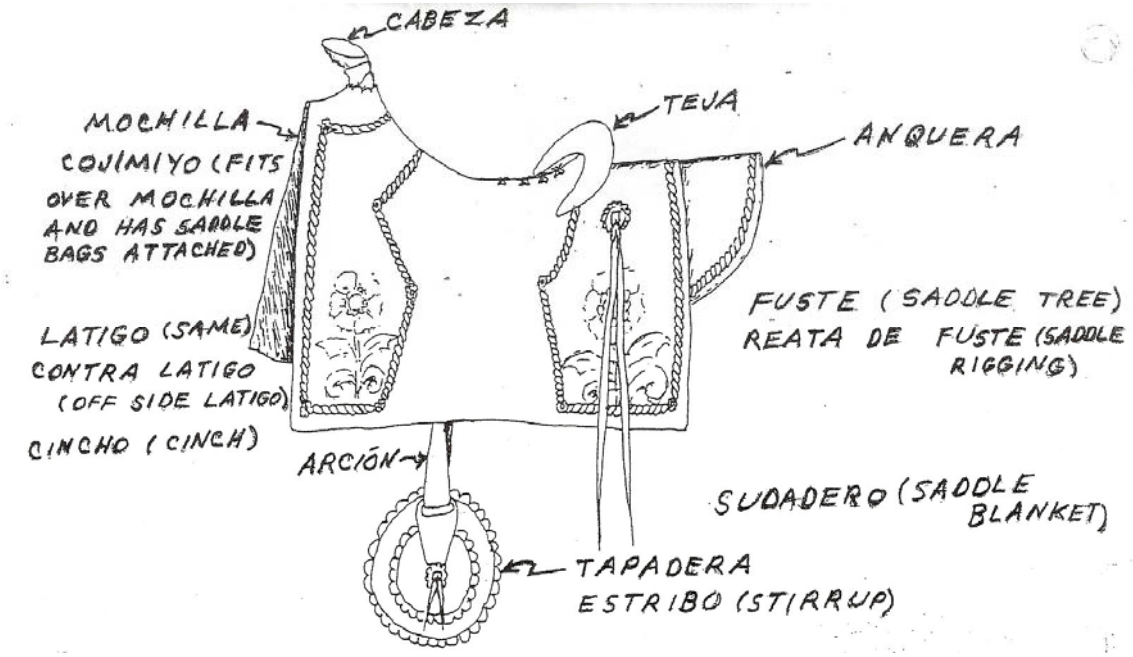
such as leading them to lush grass and protecting them from bears and other wild animals; although, they almost all end up skinned and eaten.

Once a year the vaqueros round up the cattle to brand them, separate the cattle from the different ranches, count.them, harvest the hides and tallow from those that are ready, and herd the others to new grasslands. These roundups usually involved vacqueros from several ranchos and were large social events as well as work parties. The vaqueros would show off their riding, roping, and cattle handling skills. They would hold competitions and award prizes. The roundups became known as rodeos.

IV. THE TOOLS OF THE VACQUERO

MONTURA OR SILLA (SADDLE)

The vaquero's saddle was made of wood which was covered with wet, untanned (raw) cowhide. The rawhide would shrink around the wood and become very hard as it dried. This gave the saddle great strength. Finally, the saddle was covered with tanned leather which often had beautiful geometric and flower designs stamped into it. The tanned leather part of the saddle is called the mochilla. The saddle had a knob or cabeza, later called a horn, at the front, and the vacquero would use the knob to hold his lazo (lasso) after roping a cow. The western saddle that we use today is made the same way except for some minor changes.

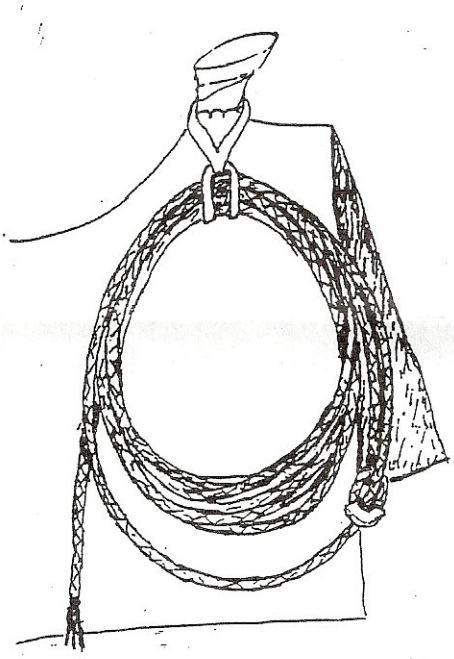


LAZO OR REATA (LASSO OR LARIAT) – Also see pages 6-8

The vaquero always carried a rope, or **reata**, tied to his saddle. It was usually about 80 feet long and carefully made out of four strips of rawhide braided together. The reata was mostly used for catching cattle and horses. Cattle were often caught by two vacqueros working together. One vaquero would rope the cow by the neck or homs and the other would catch the hind legs. This is still done on ranches and in rodeos today and is called **team roping** or **heading and heeling**.

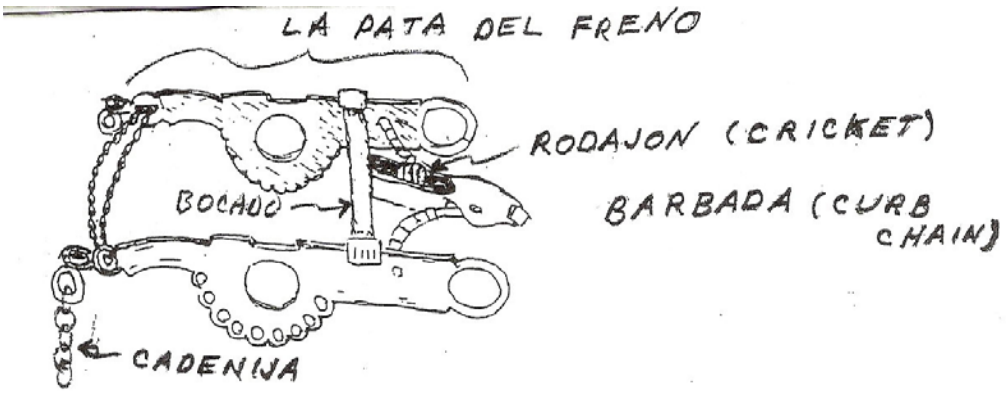
The reata was also used as a weapon to kill bears which preyed on the cattle. It was also used in warfare and proved very effective against the American Army during the Mexican-American War.

Vaqueros took great pride in their skill with a reata and they would spend a lot of time practicing and playing with it.



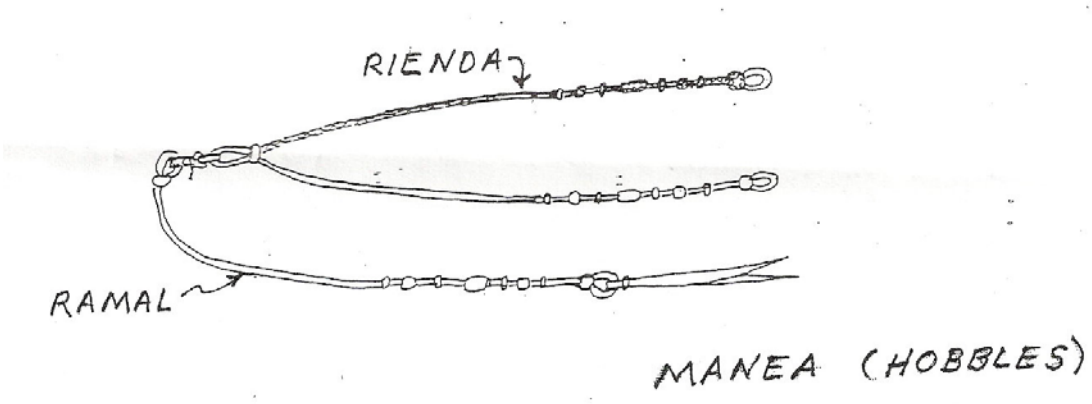
FRENO (BIT)

The California vacquero used a type of curb bit called a spade bit on their horses. It was typical of the California vacquero, but was almost never seen outside the territories worked by the Californios. It is generally thought to have been developed in California, but the technology may have come from Spain. The California spade bit, often called the Santa Barbara spade bit, was usually finely crafted and ornamental, and was often richly decorated with silver.



RIENDAS (REINS)

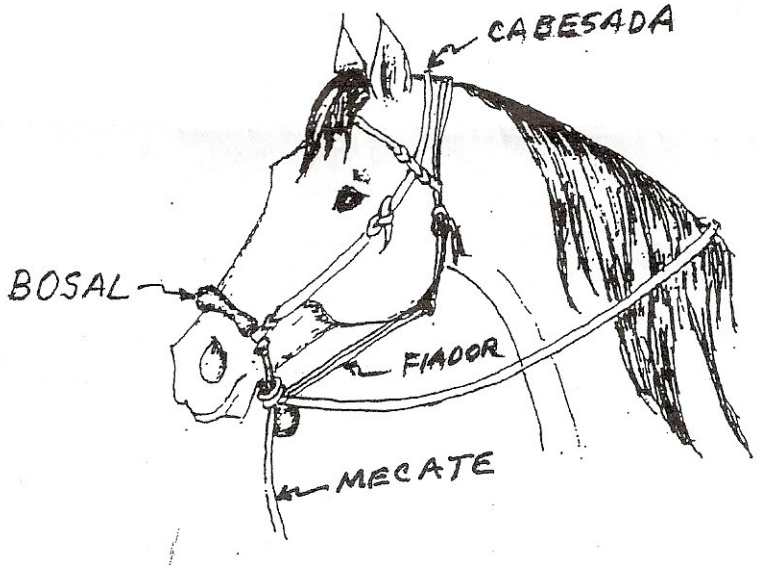
Reins were usually braided from rawhide like the reata. The California style rienda was a single rein forming a loop going from one side of the bit to the other. It had a whip-like piece called a ramal attached to it. The rein was attached to the bit with chains.



BOSAL OR JAQUIMA AND MECATÉ (BOSAL OR HACKAMORE AND MACARTY)

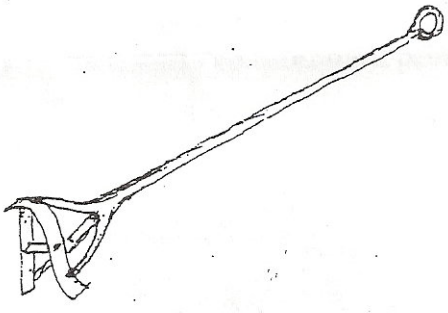
The California vacquero often used a braided rawhide loop called a **bosal**, which was wrapped around a horse's nose. This was especially used on young horses to avoid hurting their mouths with the iron bit.

A rope, usually made of horsehair and called a **mecate** was tied to the bosal and used as reins. English speaking cowboys called this rope a macarty.



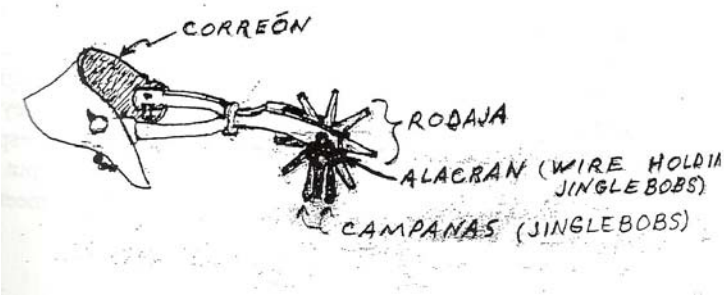
HIERRO (BRANDING IRON)

The vacqueros marked their horses and cattle with a branding iron to identify the owner of the livestock. The brands were often very artistic in design and symbolic of the family or rancho of the vacquero.



ESPUELAS (SPURS)

The California vacquero almost always wore very large spurs when riding. The spurs usually had clappers that would strike the rowels, creating a musical tinkling sound as the vacquero rode along on his horse, They were often decorated with silver.



V. SUGGESTIONS FOR ACTIVITIES

1. Have the equipment available for students to view and handle, including placing the saddle on the saddle stand and placing the reata and mecaté in the proper location.

2. Have scraps of leather and tools for students to practice stamping and decorating leather, possibly making leather conchos and stamping them with letters or a brand such as Sutter's.

3. Have students practice braiding with leather thongs or bootlaces.

4. Show the students how the reata was thrown and let them do it.

5. Combine with vaquero station with the rope making station and let the students make their own mecaté.

VI. LA REATA

The rawhide rope used by the Mexican vaquero was called **la reata**. This Spanish word became known to English speakers as lariat. The reata was also called **el lazo**, and then got into the English language as lasso.

It was usually about eighty feet long, and braided from four strands of untanned cowhide. Untanned (raw) cowhide is heavy, and it becomes hard and stiff as it dries. A rawhide rope, therefore, has the qualities of having sufficient weight to be thrown into the wind from a galloping horse, and sufficient stiffness to hold a loop open as it flies through the air.

It seems to have been invented by the hispanic vaquero; and the vaquero used it both while mounted on a horse, and on foot. The mounted Mexican vaquero would secure the reata after catching an animal with it by wrapping it around a projection on the front of his saddle. This was termed da la vuelta, or just cia le, which means to give it turns. This Spanish term led to the American cowboy term of dally roping still used today. The vaquero on foot would secure the reata after a catch by holding it around his hip and leaning into it, or wrapping it around a post or tree.

The reata enabled the vaquero to handle cattle and horses running over large expanses of unfenced land. And, this led to the development of the cattle ranching industry which was so important in the history of California, and the development of the culture and economy of the American West.

The reata was primarily a livestock working tool, but it found use as a weapon as well against livestock predators, and in war. The pre-Gold Rush California ranchers had a market only for hides and tallow, so the rest of the slaughtered cattle was left for scavenging animals. This was great for bears, and bears being bears, they were not above taking a swipe at a live cow now and then, especially after having dined on dead cows for a while. This did not put bears in good standing with the vaqueros, and the bears began meeting their end by means of a reata around the neck.

The vaqueros found that roping bear was enormously fun, and it became a major Californio pastime. The Californios would graciously invite the· new settlers to join them in the sport of bear roping, but it seems that the newcomers mostly declined, apparently finding that discretion was the better part of valor.

During the Mexican-American war some American troops had the unhappy experience of doing battle with mounted Mexican Californios armed with lances and reatas.

In the end, the Americans did learn from the Mexicans, and the lariat became as much a trademark of the American cowboy as the reata was for the Mexican vaquero.

HOW A REATA IS MADE

Step 1: A fresh cowhide, preferably from a thin animal, is staked out on the ground. It is allowed to dry until it becomes slightly firm, and can be easily cut.

Step 2: A continuous strip, approximately 3/4" wide, is cut from the hide, beginning at the center.

Step 3: The strip is stretched out between two trees, or posts, and the hair is shaved off with a knife.

Step 4: The strip is cut into 1/4" wide thongs. This may be done by running the strip between a nail and a sharp knife stuck in a piece of wood 1/4" apart.

Step 5: The thongs are softened slightly by running them between three nails set in a block of wood.

Step 6: The thongs may be skived down to an even thickness. This may be done with a blade set into a block of wood.

Step 7: The hair side edges of the thongs are shaved off This may be done with a sharp knife set at all angle in a block of wood.

Step 8: The thongs are tied up into four balls. This may be done by tying the thongs in half hitches over short sticks.

Step 9: The thongs are coated with tallow, soap, or cactus juice as they are braided in four strands over a core consisting of a 1/8" wide rawhide string. Each plait of the braid is forcefully pulled tight.

Step 10: A honda, or eye, is attached or tied at one end of the reata.

Step 11: The new reata is stretched out between two trees or posts, and it is twisted through a forked stick which is run *up* and down its length to soften and even out its texture. It is left stretched out until completely dry.

Note: The biggest secret to braiding rawhide is probably working it at the right texture or firmness. This is done by adjusting its moisture content. It should not be too wet. Putting it in a dampened burlap bag works well for achieving the right moisture content.